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ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS (IRGC):
AN IRANIAN INSTRUMENT OF POWER

by

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth E. Duck graduated from Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, LA in 1987 where he earned a B.S. in Electrical Engineering Technology. He received his commission from Officer Training School in May 1987. After completing navigator and electronic warfare training to earn his wings, he was assigned to the 62nd Bomb Squadron, Barksdale AFB, LA. During his assignment at Barksdale AFB, he deployed to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and flew missions in support of Operations Desert Storm.

In October 1991, Lt Col Duck transitioned to the B-1B and was assigned to the 77th Bomb Squadron, Ellsworth AFB, SD. In 1995, he was assigned to the 28th Bomb Squadron, Dyess AFB, TX where he was an Instructor WSO, academic instructor and flight commander. In 1999, he was assigned to the Air Force Personnel Center, Randolph AFB, TX where he was responsible for all B-1, B-2, B-52 and Air Liaison Officer assignments.

In July 2001 he attend the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, AL. Upon graduation he was assigned to the 563d Flying Training Squadron, Randolph AFB, TX. At Randolph he served as an Instructor navigator and electronic warfare officer, academic instructor, flight commander, assistant director of operations, director of operations and commander. During his assignment at Randolph AFB, he deployed in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

After completion of his commander's tour, he was assigned to Maxwell AFB, AL to attend Air War College.

Introduction

Iran is today the world's leading state sponsor of terror. It subverts the hopes for peace in other parts of the region by funding terrorist groups like Hamas....It defies the United Nations and destabilizes the region by refusing to be open and transparent about its nuclear programs. Iran's actions threaten the security of nations everywhere.

—President George W. Bush
Remarks in United Arab Emirates, 13 January 2008

Millions of [Iraqi] people have been killed or displaced, and the occupiers [United States], without a sense of shame, are seeking to solidify their position in the political geography of the region and to dominate oil resources.

—Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,
Remarks to United Nations, 23 September 2008

The comments of the respective presidents highlight the contentious and tension filled relationship between the United States and Iran. Iran's association with the U.S. since the end of WWII has occupied two distinct poles. At first, a staunch ally under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (Shah of Iran) for over three decades, Iran has since been Washington's relentless antagonist since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic state and ideological followers to power.

This paper will explore Iran's main instrument of power to confront those who seek to influence its policies and change its clerical regime—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC's conventional and asymmetrical military power, direct support from the Supreme Leader, constitutional authority, control and development of the Iran's chemical, biological and nuclear production programs, growing economic and political influence has enable the organization to emerged as the principle center of gravity in maintaining the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and protecting it from both internal and external threats. Ayatollah Khomeini formed the IRGC in May 1979 by combining several revolutionary organizations that supported his ideology. Khomeini realized he needed such an organization after several attacks were carried out against some of his key leaders during the early months of

the revolution and his distrust of Iran's regular military forces. The IRGC quickly grew to over 100,000 within a year and now stands at approximately 125,000.¹ In addition, the IRGC has become a relatively complex and cohesive organization, which has not lost its ideological enthusiasm.

In the 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, President Bush continually emphasizes Iran's current and growing threat to America's national security with respect to their support of terrorism, pursuit of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), and efforts to destabilize the Middle East region.² To understand the Bush administration's focus on Iran in the National Security document, one does not have to look hard to understand this view. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran's has demonstrated a willingness to train and finance terrorist organizations like Hezbollah. This support has produced a rich history of terrorist acts like the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon and decades of terrorist acts committed against Israel. With respect to Weapons of Mass Destruction, they have a proven ability to develop and employ chemical and biological weapons, and have a complex nuclear development infrastructure in place to advance their nuclear programs. Since the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran has become the principle threat to peace and stability in Iraq with their support of the insurgence movement and supply of advance weapons killing American and Iraqi security forces.

Iran's strategic position and influence in the region has benefited from a multitude of events, causing a weakening in the effectiveness of Washington's foreign policies. These events include, the U.S.'s ongoing troubled and expensive war in Iraq, a seemingly endless war in

¹ Pollack, Kenneth M. *The Persian Puzzle*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005, 151.

² George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2006), 7.

Afghanistan, Israel's defeat by the Iran-backed Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, a world economic crises, America's 2008 election results showing a rejection of President Bush's foreign and domestic policies, the International community's disdain for the U.S.'s foreign policies in the Middle-East, rising energy costs benefiting oil rich nations like Iran, and weak international organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which enable the Iran to circumvent policies attempting to weaken or contain their terrorist and nuclear programs.

In the continuing development of these events, it is important for the U.S. to reassess its policies with respect to Iran and implement a new engagement policy framework to eliminate or weaken the clerics' iron grip on the political election system allowing a moderate political system to evolve, break the influence of the IRGC, the most powerful interest group in Iran and protector of the clerical regime, and foster the release of the voice and freedoms of Iran's population, especially its youth. Unfortunately, a country like the United States, with the biggest economy and the most powerful military force in the world, the road of engagement with Iran will likely be bumpy, filled with danger, and seem to have a destination with no arrival time. Today we encounter an Iran showing a growing willingness to confront Washington, other world powers, and international organization in the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military arenas.

The Beginning of the IRGC

The eventual rise to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini, empowerment of the IRGC, and mistrust of U.S. intentions toward Iran has its roots connected to the 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état of the duly elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mosaddeq. The coup d'état codenamed Operation TPAJAX, brought to power the Shah of Iran and a 26-year legacy of

oppressive rule. With the Cold War at its height and Iran being a vital geopolitical and geostrategic barrier to the Soviet Union's expansion in the Middle East, the U.S. gladly backed the Shah politically and militarily. The Shah kept power during this period by methodically eliminating opposition groups through executions, incarceration, torture, and exiling clerical menaces like Ayatollah Khomeini. With most of the educated urban population supporting the Shah, these authoritarian political policies had the effect of creating a population divided into the elites and the impoverished. This elite population was comprised of prominent merchants, industrialists, and educated professionals who benefited from the Shah's government and its policies, setting the stage for a large and growing dissent from the poorer and more rural parts of Iran. During the Shah's oppressive reign, elimination of political parties, and creation of a divided population, enabled the "Mullahs" (clerics) to become the de facto opposition party to the Shah and gain political control of the villages and tribal areas of Iran who were struggling economically.³ The Mullahs now had a highly ideological and loyal force of young warriors waiting for a revolution—the IRGC.

With the Shah becoming more isolated and the country paralyzed by strikes and protests, and the military unwilling to fight the supporters of the revolution, the country's clerics, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, came to power in the 1979 revolution, establishing an Islamic state in the Middle East. Ayatollah Khomeini quickly established a new constitution, giving him the Supreme Leader title along with the power to establish and approve all major policies and institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁴ The newly formed Islamic state quickly dissolved the Shah's government and decapitated the Shah's military's leadership. The IRGC was created

³ Country, Watch. "Iran's Political Overview and Conditions." *Country Watch*. September 2008, 1.

⁴ Omid, Homa. *Islam and the Post-Revolutionary State in Iran*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1994, 1-5.

to protect the revolution, and the new constitution gave the Ayatollah Khomeini the power to establish, fund, and select its leaders. The IRGC was born and viewed its role “as the protector of the revolution and its values, and does not recognize any organization as more revolutionary or loyal to the revolution than it is.”⁵

The working class (bazaar merchants), village areas and the poor gained influence with the clergy government in the revolution and became the recruiting grounds for the IRGC and the political base for the regime’s conservative politicians. In return, the clerical leaders allowed the IRGC to help the Iranian peasants and workers seize businesses and land from the former elites. This also helped to reward the urban guerrillas who had fought the Shah throughout his rule and the clerics who used their mosque congregations to inspire the masses to believe in the revolution.⁶ This system of clerics is intact today, and provides Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic government, and the IRGC an extensive propaganda, intelligence, and political machine to influence the population.

From September 1980 to August 1988, Iran and Iraq were embroiled in a brutal war, which saw the use of chemical weapons and, by some estimates, caused over a million casualties with many more being wounded. This had a profound effect on the Iranian government, the Iranian population and the IRGC. The new clerical government and population realized their history of being invaded had not ended, and the probability of Shia versus Sunni and Persian versus Arab conflicts would continue for the foreseeable future. In 1982, the Ministry of the Revolutionary Guard was established, transitioning a revolutionary militia into a more conventional organization with all of its bureaucratic structures.⁷ With this new structure and stature, the IRGC was able to influence military strategy and tactics, which often conflicted with

⁵ Katzman, Kenneth. *The Warriors of Islam*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1993, 31.

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Ibid., 101.

the regular Iranian Army. The IRGC also started manufacturing military equipment, began acquiring defense industry businesses, and establish an independent Air Force and Navy in 1985. The IRGC's growth and influence did not come without costs. IRGC human wave tactics killed hundreds of thousands (250,000-300,000) of Iranians and corruption was considered rampant during the war.⁸ Following the war, the IRGC realized to survive and grow its power, it would need to continue organizing, training, and modernizing its military forces, and use its "war blood" credibility to advance its political influence and expand its financial interests. These would all be done under the protection and support of the Supreme Leader in the name of defending and preserving the revolution, so that the great Islamic Republic of Iran could protect its achievements and advance its ideology and aspirations.

Entering the 1990s, the IRGC found itself confronted with a complex set of issues; ensuring the smooth transition of power to Ayatollah Khomeini after death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, minimizing reformist movements efforts by the more moderate President Khatami, and quelling internal dissent during student riots in 1994 and 1999. A major test to the direction Iran would take politically and demonstrate who controlled Iran occurred in 1989 when the Ayatollah Khomeini died. The "Majlis-e Khobregan" (Council of Experts) chose the hard-liner Ayatollah Khomeini to become Iran's Supreme Leader, which signaled Ayatollah's policies would be continue by his protégé.⁹ But due to the deteriorating economy after the Iran-Iraq War, the public was losing faith in the economic policies of the hard-line regime and the public overwhelmingly elected a moderate, President Khatami in 1997. President Khatami emphasized economic reforms and a more western looking economy and diplomacy. The IRGC countered this movement by targeting the moderates with constant accusations of failures, and even

⁸ Omestad, Thomas. "Protecting the Theocracy; Iran's real muscle is the Revolutionary Guard." *U.S. News & World Report* 143, no. 15 (October 2007): 31.

⁹ Country, Watch. "Iran's Political Overview and Conditions," 1.

assaulted a moderate member of the government charging him with sacrificing ideology to achieve pragmatic objectives fundamentally in conflict with Khomeini's philosophy.¹⁰ In 1999, students in Tehran took to the streets to protest against the conservatives in the Parliament who passed legislation closing down opposition papers and severely curtailing the freedom of the press. The 1999 student repression, organized by the still powerful former-President Rafsanjani, an Ayatollah Khomeini protégé who was later considered by the U.S. as a moderate due to his pro-market economic policies, used the IRGC forces to brutally and quickly suppressed the riots by killing and jailing some students. The IRGC also organized mass rallies in support of the government to counter the internal and external criticism. After the 1999 student riots, 24 IRGC commanders issued a stern warning to reformist President Khatami they would "take matters into their own hands if the anti-regime unrest continued."¹¹ This showed that the IRGC leadership had the confidence and ability to intimidate the Iranian President, and informed him his policies would be contained by force if they caused public dissent against the revolutionary government.

For the first 20 years of the IRGC, it was clear the organization created to protect the Islamic state was not only effectively accomplishing its constitutional mandates, but was doing so in a bold and brutal fashion motivated possibly by its own self interests. But are their other motives that guide the internal and external policies and subsequent actions of the IRGC? First, nationalism could be a foundational element to the motives of the IRGC. Their nationalism could be generated by Iran's history of foreign invasion or interference in its government. Recent examples include the Russian and Britain invasion of Iran during WWII to exploit its vast oil reserves, the U.S. backed coup d'état in 1953, and the U.S. support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq

¹⁰ Katzman, Kenneth. *The Warriors of Islam*, 157.

¹¹ Jane's, Islamic Affairs Analyst. "Iranian Succession and the IRGC." *Jane Terrorism Database*. October 01, 2007. <http://search.janes.com> (accessed October 17, 2008).

War. Second, Pan-Islamism that advocates bringing Muslims under the rule of one Islamic state. The Islamic Republic of Iran since Ayatollah Khomeini advocates a collective ideology, which it has tried since the start of their revolution to export to other states and groups. Examples include Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Constitutionally, Iran's foreign policy mandate is to defend the rights of all Muslims and help those who are being oppressed. Third, revolutionary Shiism ideology, which has been proven to be beneficial for the IRGC's leaders and many of its members who were released from the grips of the Shah's repressive regime. But the clerics in Iran have had a "difficult time shedding the perception that it is first and foremost a Shia, rather than a Muslim state. Sunni Islamists continue to regard Iran with suspicion."¹² Lastly, the IRGC seems to be motivated more and more by power, because of its aggressive and brutal methods to gain political, economic, and military clout. Having weathered a revolution, war, riots, and a reformist President, the IRGC has still been able to transform into what most experts would call a powerful mafia cartel or interest group. For example, the IRGC now controls billions in contracts, owns banks to smuggling organizations, and oversees Iran's most power weapons—missiles and WMD.

Regular Forces of the IRGC

At its beginning, the IRGC was unstructured, lightly armed, and heavily factionalized. As the IRGC moved forward through the Iran-Iraq War and the reformist movements, it emerged with a force today estimated at over 125,000 men, with roughly 100,000 ground forces, 20,000 naval forces, 5,000 marines, and a small air branch composed of mostly small tactical aircraft and ballistic missiles.¹³ The capabilities and organizational strength of the IRGC was possible

¹² Connell, Michael, Alireza Nader, and Jacob Boyars. *Iran's Strategic Interests in the Middle East*. Non-Profit Research, The CNA Corporation, Alexandria: Center for Strategic Studies, 2007, 2.

¹³ Cordesman, Anthony, and Martin Kleiber. *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007, 73.

because of its stable leadership who moved upward into powerful political positions, proven dedication to preservation of the Islamic state, and ability to integrate a wide variety of ideological and culturally diverse personnel. To get a perspective, the IRGC has an active duty force equal or larger than those of Israel, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia. Leadership pragmatism is also a characteristic of the IRGC, proven by the fact it has only had three commanders since its creation in 1979, Major General Mohsen Rezaee, Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi and recently appointed Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari. Interestingly, Rezaee and Safavi did not move far from the center of clerical power, with both becoming advisors to Ayatollah Khomeini, allowing them to be in a position to continue supporting and influencing the IRGC. Researching the backgrounds of the current IRGC leadership and former IRGC members in political position, showed they all have a history to defending the Islamic ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini. These actions of resistance against the Shah and active participation in the Iran-Iraq War seemed to be an “alumni” initiation to gain trust with other leaders in the IRGC and the clerical leaders of Iran. This trust in a person’s actions to become a part of the IRGC leadership is reinforced by the fact the IRGC is not “dominated by a particular family, tribe, ethnic, or regional grouping within Iran.”¹⁴ But with an organization of over 125,000, the IRGC has also shown its strength and resiliency to maintain its ideological devotion to integrate “not only revolutionary social forces, but also social groups which do not necessarily share the Guard’s revolutionary ethos.”¹⁵

Operationally, the IRGC is developing a strategy to fight an asymmetrical war. It is doing this by organizing a light and mobile ground force, Air Force and Navy that would defeat an attacker by making the war protracted and costly in blood, to eventually wear down the

¹⁴ Katzman, Kenneth. *The Warriors of Islam*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

enemies will to fight. Change is often difficult, but the decision to change the IRGC's strategy was made easier by Iran's poor economic conditions putting pressure on limiting military expenditures, realizing the Islamic Republic could never match the conventional power of the U.S., and seeing the successes of recent asymmetrical warfare in Lebanon and Iraq.

The IRGC ground forces have recently shifted investments to "anti-tank" and "anti-helicopter" weapons, expanded its command and control structure using a fiber optic transmission structure, and changed training practices emphasizing "decentralized partisan and guerrilla warfare."¹⁶ In addition, the IRGC has "created some 3,000 special units or cells consisting of three to four soldier" designed to blend into the population of the cities and villages that have been overrun, and attack enemy lines of communications.¹⁷ These small teams would also have the ability to travel to neighboring states or internationally to carry out terrorist attacks. The U.S. has become even more vulnerable to this type of threat over the last decade, especially now that the U.S. has surrounded Iran with forces in states such as Turkey, Qatar, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This change in strategy should not be a surprise to the U.S. and contingency plans should be planned to counter this type of threat if military actions are ever considered against Iran.

Another major shift within Iran's military establishment and a demonstration of the IRGC growing power is the IRGC's leadership role in Iran's regular Army. The Iranian regular Army numbers approximately 350,000 regular and conscript forces, and has become "subordinate to the IRGC."¹⁸ After the revolution in 1979, and even during the Iran-Iraq War, the regular Army was not fully trusted since they once supported the Shah and their ideological dedication to the

¹⁶ Saremi, Fariborz. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pasdaran." *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, November 2007: 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Jane's, Islamic Affairs Analyst. "Iranian Succession and the IRGC."

Islamic Republic was not seen as pure as the IRGC's. Currently, the commander of the regular Army is Major General Ataollah Salehi, a former member of the IRGC who was appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The appointment of General Salehi and other former member of the IRGC to high-level positions within the regular Iranian military forces has effectively increased the manning of the Guard by several hundred thousand and creates a doctrinal synergy between the parallel forces not existing during the Iran-Iraq War.

The IRGC Navy has also upgraded its weapons capabilities and positioned itself in key coastal facilities along Iran's coast near the Straits of Hormuz and Saudi Arabian ports. The IRGC is believed to have upwards of 50 small attack boats, multiple onshore anti-ship launch sites, and even truck mounted anti-ship missile systems.¹⁹ In addition, unclassified estimates have the IRGC possessing over 800 antiship missiles. The IRGC has demonstrated their willingness and ability to use small boat "swarm" tactics against ships, as the Pentagon reported on 7 January 2008, when five Iranian boats threatened to attack a U.S. Navy ship near the Strait of Hormuz.²⁰ The IRGC Navy also has a history of being used by the Iranian government to send a message of dissatisfaction toward policies or sanctions being enacted against the Islamic Republic by other nations or the international community. In March 2007, the United Nation was considering another set of sanctions against Iran for their uranium enrichment activities, and the day before the scheduled vote the IRGC Navy "seized 15 British soldiers and Royal Marines," claiming they were in Iranian waters.²¹ These actions by the IRGC and the Iranian government demonstrate their ability and willingness to use light forces in an asymmetrical manner to either change or influence harmful policies or actions against Iran.

¹⁹ Cordesman, Anthony, and Martin Kleiber. *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, 77.

²⁰ Country, Watch. "Iran's Political Overview and Conditions," 1.

²¹ Saremi, Fariborz. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pasdaran," 15.

The IRGC Air Force has a small fleet of mostly light aircraft and possibility gliders that would have the capability to carry out unconventional attacks similar to “kamikaze” style tactics used by the Japanese against ships.²² It would also seem likely they would use these aircraft to effect shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC Air Force should be called the IRGC Missile force, since most of its resources are used to operate Iran’s very capable and growing missile program. In recent video releases from Iran, the IRGC has demonstrated its ability to successfully launch intermediate ballistic missiles like the Shahab-3. The missile is reported to have a capacity to carry a one-ton payload with an operational range that can reach Israel and U.S. bases in Iraq and Turkey. As the Iranian missile capability grows, this creates many regional security issues and could cause Israel, other regional powers, or the U.S. to seriously consider using military force to reduce Iran’s missile capabilities. These missile tests have already caused the U.S. to send advance missile radar systems to Israel and have created urgency in the current U.S. administration to place missile defense systems in Europe. The Islamic Republic and the IRGC are playing a dangerous game of chess and seems to be taking every opportunity to improve their position while Washington is transitioning to another administration, the U.S. is tied down with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the world is focused on a world economic crisis.

Al-Quds Forces of the IRGC

The unconventional warfare and intelligence component of the IRGC, called the Al-Quds, is directly funded by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and has the missions of exporting Iran’s Islamic ideology and building relations with nation-states or organizations that can help advance Iran’s external interests. Recently, the Al-Quds manning numbers gathered from

²² Cordesman, Anthony, and Martin Kleiber. *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, 77.

unclassified source have been growing from approximately 5,000 a few years ago to an estimated 15,000 today. This growth in Al-Quds forces signals Iran's willingness to counter or interrupt the U.S. policies toward the Global War on Terrorism, and the U.S. activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Al-Quds forces have been clearly active. Major General Bergner, spokesman for the U.S.-led forces in Iraq confirmed Al-Quds members were funding, supplying weapons, and training anti-coalition militants in Iraq. He went on to say, "we have seen the continued use of Iranian-manufactured and -supplied rockets, mortars, and explosively-formed penetrators."²³ The active participation of the Al-Quds forces gives Iran several additional regional and strategic benefits. For example, the Al-Quds' use of explosively-formed penetrators has caused the U.S. military to invest billions of dollars in electronic warfare equipment, armor to protected vehicles, and air transportation to minimize troop movement on roadways. In addition, Al-Quds has used Iraq to perfect their tactics and training methods on unconventional warfare against a superior conventional force. Finally, Al-Quds forces have gained credibility from the "Muslim streets" by showing they are willing to fight the "Great Satan" called America.

The Al-Quds' operations in Iraq are not the first time Washington has confronted the IRGC's acts of terrorism. It is believed Al-Quds forces played a supporting role in the bombing of the Marine barracks in 1983, and there is clear evidence Iran funnels approximately 100 million dollars a year to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and supports other organizations like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.²⁴ The effect of Al-Quds' support of Hezbollah became apparent in 2006, when Hezbollah forces were able to take the punch of Israel's military might and eventually force Israel to retreat from Lebanon.

²³ Editorial, The Washington Times. "Tehran's Murderous Role." *The Washington Times*. April 07, 2008. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/apr/07/tehrans-murderous-role/> (accessed October 17, 2008).

²⁴ Frick, Matthew. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, An Open Source Analysis." *Joint Force Quarterly*, April 2008: 123.

The Al-Quds forces gain access in other countries by operating out of offices in Iranian embassies, and with strong associations with the Iranian Military of Intelligence and Security forces (VEVAK), the Al-Quds have built an extensive network to gain intelligence around the world.²⁵ By establishing an organization structure within Iranian embassies, the Al-Quds forces have become a very powerful and act “almost like a second-tier foreign policy organization behind the nation's Foreign Ministry.”²⁶ Even though the Al-Quds have a great deal of power and influence, the Islamic clerics’ have a history of keeping the IRGC and its elements in line with the Islamic Republic’s policies. Al-Quds leader Mehdi Hashemi, director of the Bureau of Assistance to the Islamic Movements of the World, was arrested for allegedly orchestrating the kidnapping of a Syrian official in Tehran and objecting to Iran’s dealing with the U.S. during the Iran-Contra affair in 1986.²⁷ Hashemi was arrested, tried for treason, convicted, and executed for his unapproved actions. On the other hand, some actions might seem to be rogue actions by the IRGC and harmful to the policies of Iran, but are likely approved by the Supreme Leader. Some reports have implicated Iran in as many as 160 assassinations of revolutionary opponents residing outside its borders. Iranian Kazem Darrabi was convicted by a German court for assassinating several Kurdish-Iranian opposition leaders in Berlin, but on his released from prison after 10 years, he received a hero’s welcome during his arrival in Tehran.²⁸ The actions of the Islamic clerics and the IRGC seem harsh, but could show a pragmatic and brutal system of checks and balances in the power distributed between the two institutions of the Revolutionary

²⁵ Cordesman, Anthony, and Martin Kleiber. *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities*, 48.

²⁶ Waterman, Shaun. "Iran Changes Prelude to Attack." *United Press International* . July 15, 2008. www.upi.com (accessed October 17, 2008).

²⁷ Rubin, Michael. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards-A Rogue Outfit." *Middle East Forum*. Fall 2008. <http://www.meforum.org/article/1990> (accessed November 18, 2008), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

government. In addition, it shows Islamic clerics hold the Revolution's principles and instruments of power closely, and is systematic and selects when and when not to employ them.

Basij Mustazafin of the IRGC

The most dangerous threat to the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the rule of the Islamic clerics is not from external threats, but internal mass rebellion. To counter this, another subset of forces to the IRGC was created—Basij Mustazafin (Mobilization of the Oppressed). The Basij can be characterized with several nouns to include, national reserve, union, political base, interest group, or mafia family. It is comprised of personnel who are likely committed to the Islamic Republic because they either believe in the ideological policies of the regime or because it provides a source of employment. The Basij started from the requirement to mobilize military forces during the mass casualties caused by the Iran-Iraq War, but has grown in to a lightly armed and well trained militia group focused on policing the public for information, ensuring Islamic laws are followed, riot control, and internal security. In a recent assessment, Rahim-Safavi, commander of the IRGC, said, "There are 10 million Basij and half a million guard members. Adding their family members, there are 24 million Basij and Guards. They should be able to withstand the onslaught of the Western culture."²⁹ Iran currently has a population of approximately 70 million people, so the combination of supporters from the IRGC and its associate organizations like the Al-Quds and Basij give it a broad base to mobilize for political support, while at the same time suppressing those who might try to organize an opposition movement.

The Basij has several sub organizations to include the Ashura Brigades and the Hezbollahi "partisans of God". The Ashura Brigades is a riot control group first established in

²⁹ Jane's, Islamic Affairs Analyst. "Iranian Succession and the IRGC, 1.

1993 after several anti-government protests erupted in Iranian cities. As of 1998 the Ashura Brigades had about 17,000 dedicated Islamic women and men. Since President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's rise to power, the Ashura has had a surge in visibility by conducting urban defense exercises in several major cities. General Mirahmadi, the first deputy commander of the Basij, announced recently the formation of "2,000 Ashura battalions within the Basij will enhance Iran's defensive capabilities."³⁰ Another sub organization of the Basij is Hezbollahi who are a religious zealot version of the "Hell Angels" who are devout believers and hired thugs used to preserve the Islamic state. Hezbollahi was reportedly used by the IRGC in 1999 to attack and capture the student rioters and set fire to their dorm rooms. The actions of these Basij groups demonstrate the brutality and determination of the IRGC to subdue any opposition threatening the Islamic regime.

President Ahmadinejad, a former IRGC commander in the Basij, has instituted several internal control measures increasing the IRGC's ability to control security, doctrine, and training. In 2005, General Ali Jafari, Commander of the IRGC, announce plans to recruit and train "Lover of Martyrdom" with hopes of creating at least four divisions. With Iran's history of "human wave" attacks in the Iran-Iraq War, it is likely the IRGC would be able to get a substantial number of martyrdom recruits. Another major power grab was achieved when IRGC General Moghaddam was name head of Iran's police force. This action has placed the entire security and police force under the direct control of the IRGC. Another major development in the organization of the IRGC was the creation of its Center for Strategy. The center advocates unconventional warfare methods like suicide bombing, population control strategies, advancement of missile, and nuclear capabilities. The IRGC center could "essentially give the

³⁰ Saremi, Fariborz. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pasdaran," 17.

IRGC access to all of the nation's resources and absolute control over the regular military in time of war.”³¹

IRGC's Growing Political Power

With the IRGC expanding its military power, strengthening its internal control of the population with organizations like the Basij, and increasing its economic role, it is only natural for an organization like the IRGC to crave political muscle. The role of the IRGC in the political arena has evolved over time. Until his death in 1989, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini “guarded against the armed services' political interference.”³² After 30 years of Islamic rule by the Ayatollahs, continuing poverty, dire social conditions, the memory of the Shah's rule either fading or non-existent in the memory of the population, and the active policies of many nations and international organizations attempting to sanction and isolate Iran, the cleric leaders can no longer remove themselves from the blame of Iran's dreadful conditions. The IRGC movement, supported by Ayatollah Khomeini, toward more political, economic and military power is likely a result of the realization that the Guard's strength is directly proportional to the ability of the regime to survive. The Ayatollahs need the IRGC's protection and the IRGC requires the Ayatollah's Islamic ideological legitimacy to ensure the radical elements within Iran stay pacified and supportive of the status quo.

There have been signs the Iranian people desire change in the hard-liners' policies and in 1997 elected President Khatami, a moderate and reformist who supported economic reforms and development, and opening up diplomatic channels with the west. But throughout his eight-year presidency, he was continually challenged by the hard-line conservatives in government and

³¹Frick, Matthew. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, An Open Source Analysis," 125.

³² Jane's, Islamic Affairs Analyst. "Iranian Succession and the IRGC," 1.

often challenged opening by the IRGC commanders for his policy which they claimed cause the student riots of 1999. The conservatives and IRGC's confrontation with reformists was not a new development, as highlighted by an incident in 1989 when the IRGC was involved in beating and forcing the resignation of Iran's more moderate Ambassador to the UN, Mohammad Maallati, during a return visit to Tehran. The IRGC "accused him of insufficient commitment to the revolution's principles."³³ In addition, the current and former IRGC commanders have been known for their persistent and public commendation of the reformists' more liberal economic and media policies, especially during President Khatami's administration from 1997 to 2005. The IRGC main weapon against the reformist have been their ability to use the Basij forces to rally counter-demonstrations involving thousands of their members. This tactic has been an attempt of the IRGC to win the public affairs battles and instill a feeling within the country and Middle East region the Islamic government has the support of the people and present the students as troublemakers who are trying to destroy the peace and prosperity of the great Islamic Republic of Iran. More likely, the mass demonstrations extinguish the reformists' hopes for change and give them little optimism they will ever have the political strength to challenge the strong-armed tactics of the IRGC forces.

A huge setback to the reformist movement was the elections of 2005 bringing former IRGC commander Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the President's office. Many view President Ahmadinejad position as one of little power, relegated to being a talking head controlled by the Supreme Leader, and having little influence or responsibility within the Iranian government. What is overlooked is President Ahmadinejad's ability to appoint or replace 40 foreign ambassadors, senior positions in the government, governorships, and administrators in state-

³³ Katzman, Kenneth. *The Warriors of Islam*, 157.

owned banks. Throughout his term, he has injected associates who were ideologically allied with his hard-line views and many were former IRGC members.³⁴ Over time, former IRGC members have increased its representation in the Ahmadinejad cabinet and Iranian Parliament, and are currently holding positions in “two thirds of his cabinet and at least 80 of the 290 seats in the Parliament.”³⁵ In this post-9/11 world, an “Axil of Evil” designation by the U.S., Washington’s demonstrated willingness to eliminate regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the current U.S. Nation Security Strategy, these development are likely steering the Islamic Republic toward a “conservative alignment to better defend against the influence of the reformist opposition and the interventionist policies” of the west.³⁶

The conservatives and IRGC can also be critical of their own, and President Ahmadinejad’s has not been an exception. He has been criticized recently for the failure of Iran’s economic progress, for his comments denying the Jewish Holocaust ever occurred during WWII, and calling for Israel to be “wiped off the map.” President Ahmadinejad’s policies and comments are seen by those critical of the President as motivating the U.S. and other nations to increase economic and political pressure on Iran. His outrageous comments have also given the international community, even more than his domestic critics, plenty of “verbal and diplomatic ammunition” to criticize his presidency. Other signs President Ahmadinejad’s power might be waning, is the Supreme leader enacted several decrees “restricting Ahmadinejad’s executive powers”³⁷ and the Iranian Parliament narrowly approved Ahmadinejad’s new Interior Minister’s nomination in November, 2008. It is likely the Islamic Republic will continue on this path of becoming more conservative and having more members rising from the IRGC alumni, due to the

³⁴ Hen-Tov, Elliot. "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism." *Project MUSE*. Winter 2007. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 7, 2008), 1.

³⁵ Omestad, Thomas. "Protecting the Theocracy; Iran's Real Muscle is the Revolutionary Guard," 31.

³⁶ Hen-Tov, Elliot. "Understanding Iran's New Authoritarianism,"1.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

recent history of the Council of Guardians eliminating hundreds of candidates who they felt were not loyal to the beliefs and practices of the Islamic state.

IRGC's Growing Economic Power

The IRGC has grown its military and political power, but has increasingly positioned itself to be a major economic powerhouse within Iran. The Guard has become an economic cartel involved in a broad array of businesses to include defense manufacturing, oil and gas production, pharmaceutical, banks, real estate, and smuggling of black market items such as illegal drugs and alcohol. In October, 2007 Treasury Secretary Paulson, stated “it is increasingly likely that if you are doing business with Iran, you are doing business with the IRGC.”³⁸ By most estimates the IRGC is controlling at least \$12 billion in contracts and business assets. The financial wealth created by the IRGC would be substantial for any business, but is much more telling of an organization designed for and of the people for the protection of the Islamic regime. It indicates the leaders of the IRGC are moving toward and becoming more interested in business adventures and moving away from their Ideological base, ever so slightly, into an organized crime syndicate.

The IRGC's shift to economic adventures could be rooted in the Iran-Iraq War when opportunist and drafted members entered the IRGC. Due to the war losses the IRGC was forced to recruit “tens of thousands of youths, drawn from the unemployed and lumped elements of the urban slums,” who were not as fanatical as in their support of the original Guard members and eventually moved upward into the IRGC establishment, and Revolutionary government and its committees.³⁹ These institutional developments, economic engagement, and political

³⁸ Rosen, James. "World Bank Using U.S. Funds to Boost Iranian Industry, Gas Sectors." *Fox News*. February 01, 2008. http://iranfocus.com/en/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14027&pop=1&page=0 (accessed December 06, 2008), 1.

³⁹ Katzman, Kenneth. *The Warriors of Islam*, 1.

involvement have transformed the IRGC into a large bureaucratic machine focused on money, influence, and survival. The Mullahs have also been involved and have taken ownership of most of the wealth in Iran by seizing “banks, hotels, car and chemical companies, makers of drugs and consumer goods.”⁴⁰ This could be a strategic mistake by the Mullahs and IRGC, since they seem to be forming into everything the people of Iran despised about the Shah. The big difference between now and then is the Mullahs and the IRGC have not become isolated and have their eyes and ears on the streets, and have the ability and willingness to crush any sign of defiance or threat to the Islamic regime.

Washington’s current policy toward Iran is engagement through economic and political pressure. On 15 August 2007, the U.S. named the Al-Quds element of the IRGC a “terrorist organization,” enabling the U.S. to press for and receive economic sanction against Iran through the UN. Some supporters of Iran, like Venezuela, have used the terrorist designation of the Al-Quds for propaganda to show the international community has a double standard with respect to U.S. policies in the Middle East. Politically, these supporters propagate the message to their people and the Muslim streets that a country like the U.S. does not have any credibility calling an organization of another state a terrorist group, when it has invaded the sovereign country of Iraq, and indefinitely imprisons and tortures detainees in Guantanamo, Cuba. Regarding the economic sanctions, they seem to have little effect on the IRGC ability to control multi-billion dollar contracts. Even before the world economic slowdown, Iran’s vast oil and gas reserves gives it leverage against most sanctions. Countries like Germany, Spain, Austria, South Korea, and France have continued to engage with the current Iranian government with respect to development of Iran’s oil and gas industry. A second level effect of the IRGC’s economic

⁴⁰ Klebnikov, Paul. "Millionaire Mullahs." *Forbes*. July 21, 2003. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed October 2, 2008), 1.

involvement is their ability to gain influence over the populace by offering employment to those who demonstrate support for the IRGC and its policies.

However, there is evidence of a growing problem with “corruption and careerism” and “the IRGC’s role in the defense industry has led to financial abuses.”⁴¹ As an organization’s bureaucracy grows, many corrosive effects can surface both internal and external, and can include inefficiencies, opposition, competition, and leadership power struggles. For example, 30 years after the Revolution, Iran is still producing “30 percent less” oil than in 1979 and Iran’s oil industry workforce is “180,000 employees versus 54,000” and is “ranked 79 behind Kenya by the UN Human Development Report’s which ranked 124 countries.”⁴² Iran’s poor economy has also creates problems for the current regime, to include a high unemployment, inequality of wealth distribution, drugs, AIDS, and high rape rates. Iran’s economic conditions might be its “Achilles Heel” if a comprehensive set of sanctions, focused on the Mullahs and the IRGC and not the people, could be applied and supported by the international community. If anything, this demonstrates the failures of the clerical regime polices, along with the IRGC inefficient manipulation of the economy, will unlikely be reversed until they are both removed.

Conclusion

We cannot tolerate nuclear weapons in the hands of nations that support terror. Preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons is a vital national security interest of the United States....I will use all elements of American power to pressure the Iranian regime, starting with aggressive, principled and direct diplomacy—diplomacy backed with strong sanctions and without preconditions.

—President Elect Barack H. Obama
Remarks in Washing D.C., 15 July 2008

Although the Supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini holds the most constitutionally powerful position in the Iranian government, the IRGC has emerged over the last thirty years as

⁴¹ Saremi, Fariborz. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pasdaran," 15.

⁴² Hen-Tov, Elliot. "Understanding Iran’s New Authoritarianism,"1.

the most influential organization with respect to Iran's political, economic and military power. For the incoming administration of President Elect Obama to develop effective policies to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from developing nuclear weapons and supporting terrorism, they must have a direct engagement policy with Iran and focus this engagement on reducing, if not, eliminating the growing influence of the IRGC. The IRGC and its complex web of organizations have shown the ability to counter or frustrate the United States' strategies of defusing Middle-East conflicts, promoting economic freedom through free markets and free trade, combating terrorism, developing free societies by promoting democracies and human rights, and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

The growing power of the IRGC is likely the result of two possibilities. First, the Islamic leaders feel the IRGC is their only means of survival from a growing international and internal pressure, therefore they are allowing them to take a more active role in the government, economy, and security forces. Secondly, the IRGC is actively maneuvering to take power from the Islamic leaders to change Iran into a more conventional authoritarian regime. Even though the first possibility is more likely, the growing power of the IRGC in the military, economic and political arenas should not be discounted. A 30-year-old Islamic regime trying to spread an ideology, which has not given chemical or biological weapons to terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, might be the better option. But, an authoritarian regime with WMD whose survival is threatened could be a more volatile and dangerous actor. Either way, Iran is unlikely proceeding down a road of peaceful interaction with the west, integrating its institutions with the international community, and freeing its people from brutal Islamic and authoritarian rule.

Those desiring to change Iran from a hard-line Islamic state guarded by the IRGC, into a nation which supports democratic freedoms and becomes a stabilizing versus destabilizing force

in the Middle East, have put their hopes on the youth of Iran. Secretary of State Rice has requested and received “\$75 million to promote democracy, expand fellowships and scholarships for Iranian students, and to bolster our public democracy efforts.”⁴³ But due to the IRGC’s harsh response during the student riots of 1999, the youth and general population have been relegated to a submissive rebellion against the Islamic government. They strive for co-existence with the regime and show resistance by non-violence actions and communications. For example, many Iranians practice religion in private versus in public, so the Islamic regime cannot use their attendance as propaganda to show the world a perceived view of support for the clerical rulers. In another example, the youth defy clothing restrictions by not wearing the hejab (religious veil for women), participating in late-night parties with western music, drinking, dancing, drug use and promiscuity.⁴⁴ Unless a leader could survive the persecution of the IRGC and the conservative clerics, it is unlikely the general population could “spark” another revolution to cause a regime change in the near future.

Any comprehensive plan to change the actions of the Islamic regime or the IRGC would also have to consider the economic instrument of power. To this date, there is little evidence Iran can be influenced by economic pressure such as sanctions, even though it would seem simple with a country relying mainly on one source of funding. The Iranian economy, by some estimates is 85 percent reliant on the oil and gas industry. To counter this vulnerability, Iran along with the IRGC has made a concerted effort to establish economic relations with other nations like Switzerland, Indonesia, India, South Korea, Malaysia, Russia and China. Khatam-Anbia (KOA), an IRGC company, won a \$2.3 billion contract from the Islamic Republic of

⁴³ O'Neil, John. "Rice to Ask for \$75 Million to Promote Democracy in Iran." *The New York Times*. February 15, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/15/politics/15cnd-rice.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print (accessed October 17, 2008), 1.

⁴⁴ Cohen, Jared. "Iran's Young Opposition: Youth in Post-Revolutionary Iran." *Project MUSE*. Fall 2006. <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 07, 2008), 4-6.

Iran government to develop a pipeline connecting Iran's vast gas reserves to India. To accomplish this project, KOA is in negotiated "with Dutch, French, Italian and Spanish companies to come in as a subcontractor."⁴⁵ But dealing with the IRGC and its companies does carry some risk, especially since the IRGC companies seem to cooperate with the IRGC military branches. For example, KOA managed to gain ownership of an oil rig in the Persian Gulf without fully compensating the Romanian owners, and when the Romanians tried to get it back, "the IRGC Navy showed up, boarded the oil rig and took it over."⁴⁶ Even when trying to sanction Iran for its nuclear program, the U.N. has been ineffective in monitoring all the activities of the IRGC and later found at least "15 firms, operating as fronts for the IRGC" who were supplying Iran with non-approved material and equipment.⁴⁷ Since Iran, along with help from the IRGC, have shown the ability to weather or bypass sanctions, it is unlikely economic sanction could be effective unless all countries, to include China, Russia, and North Korea, cooperate and support the sanctions on the transfer of nuclear and missile technology.

After years of isolating Iran and branding them the "axis of evil," the Bush administration has shifted this policy slightly by sending U.S. Undersecretary of State William Burns to the July 2008 Geneva talks between the EU and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. This move by the U.S. probably has several objectives that include, repairing our relations with the international community, signaling Iran we now consider their nuclear programs to be at a mature stage, and demonstrating to the Iranian people the U.S. supports options other than military force. If

⁴⁵ McDowall, Angus. "Ghorb's Contracting Coup." *Middle East Economic Digest*. July 07, 2006. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=21934587&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 07, 2008), 1.

⁴⁶ Timmerman, Kenneth. "The Sopranos of Iran." *Front Page Magazine*. August 17, 2007. <http://frontpagemag.com/Articles/Read.aspx?GUID=CBE5E116-8DF4-41D2-B500-CC1862083269> (accessed October 2, 2008), 1.

⁴⁷ Eckert. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards Beat sanctions." *Reuters*. August 22, 2007. <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldnews/idUSN2244375020070822?sp=true> (accessed October 17, 2008).

military force were to be used, it is likely the IRGC would activate a virtual hornets nest of capabilities like the IRGC's Navy forces which could be used to reduce or close shipping in the Straits of Hormuz, and the Al-Quds forces to carry out terrorist acts in numerous locations throughout the world or influence Hezbollah and Hamas to attack Israel. With military strikes viewed as an option that would ignite a firestorm of Muslim hatred for the west and only turn the Iranian population toward the clerical leaders and the IRGC, diplomatic engagement seems the only path to progress between Iran and the U.S.. If diplomacy becomes the cornerstone of our strategy, the U.S. should understand this would be a long journey of small steps to achieve any progress with the Islamic clerics or weakening the growing economic, political and military power of the IRGC. Recently, Ayatollah Khamenei signaled he would not support a path of cooperation with the U.S. by saying, "Any backing down will open the way for a series of endless pressures and never-ending retreats."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Frick, Matthew. "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, An Open Source Analysis," 125.

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